

VZCZCXRO0684
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #0574/01 0641338
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 051338Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2002
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/CJCS WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC//NSC//

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000574

SIPDIS

PLEASE PASS TO AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE HILL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/05/2014

TAGS: [IZ](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: BAGHDAD UPDATE: WHAT'S AHEAD AS TROOPS DRAWDOWN?

Classified By: Deputy Polcouns John G. Fox, reasons 1.4 b/d.

(U) This is one in a series of messages intended to provide background for policy-makers on Iraq.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: As Iraq's capital, Baghdad is inherently important. It is home to a large and diverse population (approximately six million of Iraq's estimated 28 million total), with increasing numbers of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) returning to mixed neighborhoods. Baghdad's political scene encompasses the entire spectrum of parties and actors. PM Maliki did well in the Baghdad provincial elections, and is well placed to develop it further as a key part of his political base and centralizing ambitions. Throughout our planned reduction of troops, Iraq's capital will necessarily remain a top political-military focus for us and for Iraqis, even if the country's largest current flashpoints lie elsewhere. END SUMMARY.

POLITICS: ELECTIONS MATTER;
MALIKI UP, ISCI DOWN

¶2. (SBU) The January 31, 2009, Provincial Council (PC) elections shifted Baghdad politics dramatically. Candidates associated with PM Maliki (i.e., those tied to the Da'wa party) did especially well, winning 28 of 57 seats. Da'wa's rise was at the expense of candidates associated with the formerly dominant Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). While internal politicking over PC leadership roles continues, contacts report that it is likely Maliki and Da'wa will cement a strategic partnership with the Sadrists. Both parties have spoken publicly of such a deal, which we are seeing replicated in the southern, Shi'a-dominated provinces. The prospect of a Da'wa-Sadr alliance has alarmed other parties, including Baghdad Sunnis who speculate that such an arrangement might empower the more extreme Sadrists and their supporters, including some with a role in past Shia militia activity in the capital.

¶3. (C) New PC members, although not yet officially seated, reportedly have been touring Baghdad to assess the most urgent infrastructure priorities, including in the vast Sadr City district. If the new PC coalition is able to deliver better services, Da'wa's momentum may carry into parliamentary elections set for the end of 2009 or early ¶2010. In prior years, Baghdad residents voiced concerns about too much Iranian influence in the capital (in large part owing to ISCI's ties to Tehran). Today, some are

signaling a different worry: that a consolidation of power by Maliki, whose electoral mandate in the PC election demonstrated that his "tough but fair" mantra has found a supportive audience among Baghdad voters. The Sadr City district chairman, however, has implied that any new Maliki-Sadrism partnership could include "side deals" that hinder wider political reconciliation and exacerbate inter-party suspicions.

SECURITY: TROOP DRAWDOWN;
OUR LAST GAMBLE?

14. (SBU) Baghdad benefited first, and perhaps the most, from the U.S. troop surge. In 2006 and into 2007, sectarianism exploded in the capital's mixed neighborhoods. Today, in comparison, those same streets are mostly quiet. The presence of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) has grown within the city, alongside U.S. Joint Security Stations (JSSs). Some contacts have reported that displaced Shia residents have been quicker to return to mixed neighborhoods than are Sunnis. Ironically, they often cite the success so far of the "Sons of Iraq" (SOI) program, comprised largely of Sunnis, as the primary reason. Several Baghdadis have said that they fear that Shia militias, in contrast, appear to have only gone underground rather than abandon the fight altogether.

15. (C) The departure of U.S. combat units from the capital will test this calm. Security remains fragile. A Coalition

BAGHDAD 00000574 002 OF 002

focus on ISF development should help lessen residents' fears that incompetent (or complicit) ISF will allow for a return of the militias and lead to a repeat of the past cycle of Shia-Sunni bloodletting. The transitional presence of U.S. forces will allow us to test the extent to which the ISF can increasingly stand and operate on its own and in a non-sectarian fashion. (Many Iraqis found President Obama's emphasis, in his February 27 speech, on continued U.S. support for a non-sectarian ISF to be particularly reassuring.)

16. (C) As national political leaders work through their many political disagreements -- most prominently and urgently those involving Kurdish-Arab relations -- PM Maliki will continue to seek to consolidate his emerging Baghdad electoral base. Cutting a deal with the Sadrist makes short-term political sense for him, but he may have to cast his net wider, perhaps including ISCI, in order to repeat his success in national elections. Iraq's historical political culture is one of a strong centralized government, a model Maliki is seeking to reassert. To the extent he succeeds in making all political roads lead to Baghdad, the capital will become even more important. In tension with this ambition, however, is a desire by the Kurdistan Regional Government and many provinces for stronger local powers. The Prime Minister is popular in Baghdad today and, with the Provincial Council electoral mandate in hand, he is well-positioned to solidify the capital as a key part of his political base.
BUTENIS